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Flexible-Time Work May Save Money



By
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Within the next few years, thousands of federal workers will be setting their own hours, and government offices will be able to extend service time without resorting to costly—and frequently abused—overtime.

The Social Security Administration has just completed a six-month "checkup" of its experimental program called flexi-time, and found that both employees and operations are in generally good condition. Officials plan to expand the flexible hours concept to other units of the agency, which has 22,000 workers in Baltimore.

SSA's Baltimore-based Bureau of Data Processing began the flexible hours program earlier this year, after getting a try-out approval from Civil Service Commission. Under the flexi-time concept adopted by that bureau, most of the 370 employees are allowed to set their own work hours—after consulting with supervisors—so that they work an eight-hour day between the "core time" of 6:30 a.m. and 6 p.m. Workers may vary their shifts, day by day, so long as they put in eight hours and their schedules conform with workloads of the bureau.

The flexi-time system has also been adapted by another SSA operation in Baltimore, the Bureau of Retirement and Survivors Insurance. Their variation however, allows workers to set their own work shifts but unlike

the other SSA operation, employees must maintain that shift for an extended period of time and cannot vary work hours day to day.

Because of the requirement that Uncle Sam pay overtime for work in excess of eight hours a day, the government has been unable to follow the pattern of many private organizations which have put employees on four day weeks of 10 hours a day. In those cases, many firms have been able to extend the work day at least two hours, for the benefit of customers, and also provide six-and even seven day service without overtime. Overtime for many of the firms does not kick in until the employee has worked more than 40 hours in a week. By contrast, rank-and-file government workers must be paid overtime for work in excess of eight hours a day even if the workweek does not exceed 40 hours.

Key federal officials are excited by the flexi-time concept because it has the potential of letting employees set their own hours and, more importantly, of expanding government services to times when the public needs them.

Although Uncle Sam has

many round the clock activities, the bulk of the federal workforce remains on an eight-hour day, Monday through Friday. Citizens who must visit a federal agency often find it closed at 5 p.m. and on weekends, meaning they must take time off from their jobs to make such a visit.

Flexi-time, at least for the present, will be confined to operations that already involve shift work, computerization and record-processing. But the potential is there, eventually, for workers to fix hours that best suit their own individual styles, thus permitting agencies to remain open longer, and open earlier, for the benefit of taxpayers.

To encourage federal agencies to begin thinking about the expanded hours concept, the Civil Service Commission this week is sending key officials a 16-page booklet called "Flexi-time". It tells how the system works, ways to survey its potential for the federal system and employee attitudes and the possibilities it opens up for government.

CSC brass have been closely monitoring the application of flexi-time, which is growing in popularity in Europe. It was in-

roduced in Germany in the late 1960s and it is now estimated that four of every 10 workers in Switzerland, public and private, work a flexible-hours tour. Great Britain also is studying expansion of flexi-time for its civil servants. Already an estimated 9,000 crown employees are working flexi-time hours. The program also is popular in the Scandinavian countries.

Your Personnel Folder: You could demand to inspect most of the data your agency has collected on you under legislation that should clear the House Rules Committee this week. The open-file proviso is part of a much larger Right to Privacy Act that House leaders hope will get full House approval by Friday.

If the act becomes law, employees could have a look at everything in their files, except for confidential medical data and security-related material. If it does become law, one would suspect that there will be some rather large bonfires in some federal agencies as officials destroy data they've accumulated on workers that—in the light of day—would look downright stupid, irrelevant and possibly illegal.